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Possible Iraqi Military Action Against Syria
Talking Points for the DDCI
19 September 1983

Summary

We see no possibility that Iraq could be induced to attack Syria to force a reopening of the Iraqi oil pipeline. Iraq lacks the military capability to credibly threaten Syria. The entire Iraqi Army is tied down along the Iranian front and most vital Syrian targets are near the limits of the ranges of Iraqi fighter aircraft. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, already vulnerable to domestic criticism over the war with Iran, will not risk a two front war. Moreover, even if the Israelis were able to tie down Syria's forces, Saddam would not risk attacking Syria and appearing in the eyes of the Arab world as a tool of the Israelis. The Iraqis almost certainly realize that any attack on Syria, rather than forcing Syria to reopen the pipeline, likely would provoke Damascus into destroying it. Finally, we doubt Iraq would trust a scheme in which Iraq's vulnerability to Syrian retaliation is linked to Israel's attacking Syrian forces along the Golan. Iraq would expect Israel to sucker them into attacking Syria, then do nothing themselves.

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Iraqi Military Capabilities

Ground Forces

- Iraq has an army of 600,000 troops, nearly three times that of Syria. The Iraqis and Syrians are nearly equal in armor and artillery.
- All of Iraqi's 20 divisions, however, are stationed along the Iranian front. Only a few Iraqi police and border guard units are stationed along the Syrian border.
- As a result, any move by the ground forces against Syria would have to come at the expense of the Iranian front, something we believe the Iraqis would not do. Baghdad would reason that, the moment it

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launched an attack against Syria, Iran would launch an offensive against the Iraqi forces still on the Iranian border.

- Even if Baghdad was willing to send forces to the Syrian border, the most we estimate it could spare would be about two divisions-- approximately 30,000 troops. This would be insufficient to significantly threaten the Syrians.
 - Iraq would be aware that it actually would have to invade Syria to have an effect, thus raising the possibility of becoming bogged down in a two front war. In 1976 Iraq deployed some 75,000 troops along the Syrian border and made threatening statements to the Syrians over Lebanon. The Syrians simply ignored the Iraqis.
 - Moreover, Iraqi ground forces could seize neither the entire length of the pipeline nor Syrian installations of sufficient value to force Damascus to reopen the pipeline. The major Syrian dam on the Euphrates, as an example, is some 250 kilometers from Iraq, too far for Iraqi ground forces. The most the Iraqis could hope to seize are some minor oil fields in northeast Syria and a few small border towns.
 - Because the Iraqis could not seize the entire length of the pipeline, Damascus would retain the option of destroying pumping stations on the pipeline thus rendering it unusable for months.
- [redacted]

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Air Force

- Iraq has some 400 operational fighter and bomber aircraft, about eight times as many operational aircraft as Iran.
 - We estimate Iraq could spare some 200 fighter and bomber aircraft for attacks against Syria. The Iraqis, who depend heavily on their Air Force to defeat Iranian ground attacks, probably would judge they could spare much less.
 - Even if the Iraqis used 200 aircraft against Syria, they would be significantly outnumbered by the approximately 500 operational Syrian fighter aircraft.
 - Moreover, most important Syrian targets are in the western third of the country, near the limits of the ranges of the Iraqi aircraft and heavily defended by Syrian surface-to-air missile sites.
- [redacted]

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Israeli Involvement

- An Iraqi attack on Syria is militarily feasible only if Israel ties down nearly all Syrian forces. Unless Israel actually goes to war with Syria, however, Iraq would risk being left alone in a two front war. Such a situation would be disastrous for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein who is already vulnerable to criticism for having led his country into the war with Iran.

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-- Yet, once there is a crisis involving Israel and Syria, the Iraqis almost certainly will not attack Syria for fear of being perceived by the other Arabs as an Israeli accomplice. [redacted]

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